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How The Innovators Connection matches big businesses with

By Cheryl V. Jackson, Special to Blue Sky

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Franco Savoni walked into a business-networking program thinking small Tuesday. And he did it with no apologies.

To help advance business at Elkay, an Oak Brook-based sink and faucet manufacturer, Savoni is checking out the work and products of smaller companies.

“There’s so much innovation (at small companies) that’s going on close to home,” Savoni, Elkay’s water-cooler products director, said during a reception for The Innovators Connection, a Chicago Innovation Awards program that connects startup companies with larger businesses that need products or services.

The program, in its second year, says it matches “relevant Chicago Innovation Awards nominees and start-ups to large company participants.” Nominations are open until next week for the October awards program. Small businesses that aren’t nominated can apply on the Chicago Innovation Awards website.

Larger companies pay \$7,500 a year to participate.

At last year’s event, 19 large companies, including Dell, UPS and program sponsor Molex, shared what they were looking for in terms of technologies and services from small enterprises. The program made about 500 matches, resulting in 100 connections, program director Bryan Brochu said.

Matching for this year’s program begins in December.

Our mission has been to celebrate, educate and connect innovators and entrepreneurs throughout the city of Chicago. It formalizes our ability to connect small companies with large corporations.”

Such efforts mean a better Chicago-area economy, said Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

“By bringing together large corporations with startups in meaningful ways,” she said, “new value will be created for Cook County businesses and for the entire Chicago region.”